Bright Eyes
by
Jim Tully

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BRIGHT EYES

BY JIM TULLY

We were known as road-kids in the parlance of hoboes. And nearly a hundred of us had assembled in Chicago from every State in the nation. What a gathering we were! Embryo pickpockets, bruisers, and yeggmen, and—maybe—a few future members of Rotary Clubs, we lived, like carefree scavengers, on the very fringes of society. Out of orphanages, reform schools and jails we had come, the sniveling and the stubborn, the mongrel and the thoroughbred, the weak and the never-defeated. The youngest of us was about twelve; the oldest about fifteen. A future champion pugilist was among us, and five lads who were to serve life for murder, and fourteen others who were to be detained in different penitentiaries for lesser periods of time. One became a vaudeville head-liner; another a political boss. Some were to die fighting for a nation that, with boundless generosity, had given them but hallways and box-cars to sleep in. One became a Methodist minister, later falling from grace long enough to serve a term for forgery. He was then to climb back on the chariot of God, where he remained until he died insane. We were a variegated crew.

We lived at the Newsboys' Home—a faded, red-brick building that overlooked Lake Michigan. The most popular lad in the institution was a little Italian whose real name we never knew. Young as we were, many of us had something to hide, and he was reticent. We did not question him. His eyes were large, brown, and sparkling, so we called him Bright Eyes.

Bright Eyes and I had reached the Home on the same Winter day. Blue with the cold and very lonely, we became friends immediately. Our natures were different . . . I was the rebel in knee breeches, with tangled red hair and heavy jowl, who told life to go to hell. Bright Eyes was as calm as a June morning after the rains are done.

In those hungry, wind-whipped days I hated routine as much as I do now, and every person I met tried to mold me to fit some form. But always my head stuck out. Bright Eyes was a gentleman and rebelled against life but once. A year younger than I, he was very much wiser. He knew by instinct that which I have been many years in the learning: that it doesn't pay to fight life—that, after all, it doesn't matter. One either comes through or one doesn't, and often the thoroughbred is hamstrung in the race. Life is greater than its philosophers. Bright Eyes knew that.

I remember one evening in the Home when we assembled to meet a very wealthy lady. We all read compositions that we had written. I read my own aloud and it was greeted with applause. I had written about General Wolfe, who was my favorite hero in those days. The grey-haired and bespectacled lady was amazed. She shook my hand and turned to the matron and said, "There's literary talent displayed here," and asked my name.

It was my first literary triumph. All of us speculated as to the outcome of her remark. I lived in the clouds for three days, waiting for her carriage to come after me.

Bright Eyes said no word while I lived through that feverish dream. Reticent, as usual, he finally called me aside and said: "You'll never hear from her, Jim. Don't kid yourself. Those people can't be bothered with the likes of you and me. Look

at last Christmas. Not a soul came near this joint all day."

He was right. I never heard from Mrs. Marshall Field again.

It was bitterly cold the week following. The wind howled from the lake for seven days and seven nights. As the Home was closed from early in the morning until late in the afternoon, Bright Eyes and I were at the mercy of the cold. We were thinly clad. We had no change of outer clothing—and no under clothing at all.

At last Bright Eyes got a job in a print-shop. He had learned something of the trade somewhere. Cold as it was, I preferred the open streets, where I sold newspapers and carried luggage for travelers going from one station to another. And so several bitter weeks passed.

One evening Bright Eyes returned wearing a bandage over his left eye. Some printers ink had got into it. The eye grew worse. A doctor was called in. Three weeks later the eye was removed. . . . Unskilled in words of sympathy, we knew not what to say. For several days a sadness hung over the Home. A patch was devised to hide the empty red socket . . . the sadness passed . . . and save for depressing moments, Bright Eyes was seemingly happy once again.

But we called him Bright Eyes no longer. With the terseness of our world we called him Blink.

II

He never returned to the print-shop. He had lost interest in work. The months drifted by until Spring. We took to the road, and our ways diverged.

But nearly all of us became hoboes, and so I would come across him now and then in the underworld of some city. He always worried for fear the loss of his eye would affect the sight of the other. It became a mania with him. Cheerful liar that I was, I told him that such a thing was impossible. I argued that one-eyed people could always see better than people with two eyes. Blink tried to believe me. He became a hopeless vagrant.

After years of wandering some of us settled in Southern California, and there I met him again. He was still worrying about blindness, and I did my usual lying. I told him about a fellow in the navy with one eye who could see further than any other man who sailed in ships. Blink listened quietly and then said:

"God, Jim, I don't want to lose my other glim. There's so much to see!"

I immediately cut in: "But hell, Blink, you like music, and you can always hear that. And you can hear engines whistlin' far off. Bein' blind ain't so damn bad."

"Don't kid me, Jim, I'm on. I'd rather be in jail for life—than blind. There ain't nothin' worse."

A Spanish girl passed in a riot of color, her lithe body alive with joy. Some red-winged blackbirds danced on the green grass of the plaza where we talked. Far away, through a rift in the Mexican tenements, we could see the mountains.

The Spanish girl returned, singing.

"That's a song about a bird with a broken wing," said Blink. "I wonder if he had just one glim too."

I believe that now and then there blossoms in the world a flower that has been a thousand years in the forming. Blink had certain qualities that could be explained in no other way. His knowledge of music was astonishing. One-eyed vagabond that he was, he knew the folk-music of all the nations, and he knew grand opera too. He would go hungry to hear music; often, indeed, he would beg his way to the top-most gallery to feed his soul.

The Spanish girl's song died away. We remained tense and silent with wonder. Two heavy-footed men approached. We knew them immediately as city detectives.

"We want you as a vag," one of them said to Blink. "You've been hangin' around here long enough."

They took him to the nearest street corner and called the patrol-wagon. Before I left him I said:

"Remember, Blink, you're not guilty—and stand trial."

"All right, Red," he answered, with absolute unconcern.

I hurried away with the hope of helping him. We were not without friends in Los Angeles—though all of them had to be careful to avoid the trap of the law themselves. So when Blink faced the police judge the next morning, five of us were there to help him. He pleaded not guilty, and stood trial.

Two of our friends who went in and out of the court-room were opium smugglers. They had hurried from the Mexican border to help a friend. When the trial was over they hurried to their work again. It was a two-hour battle. The two detectives testified, but Blink's friends proved to their own satisfaction, and evidently the judge's, that he had worked within the past six months. The young prosecutor harangued. The judge looked bored, and kept gazing at a crookedly hung picture of Abraham Lincoln all through the trial. When the testimony was in he gave Blink six months in jail and suspended the sentence providing Blink got a job within a week.

In three days Blink had work as a printer's devil on the Los Angeles *Times*. He worked for two months at this job. But his fear of losing his other eye returned. Long weakened, it began to cause him trouble. His little band of uninfluential friends became alarmed. They persuaded him to go to the County Hospital, where he lay upon a bed for four months and underwent as many operations. When the doctors had finished there were two empty red sockets in his head instead of one.

I had encouraged him with lies for thirteen years. Now I found it hard to lie any further. After all, very little can be said to a man with two empty red sockets in his head. The thing to do was to keep him cheerful. Yet every subject I raised seemed to be an ocular one. He would lie on the bed, his raven-black hair rolling back from his forehead, and the tears welling out of the red holes in his head like water from a spring.

He was taught the Braille system of reading, but there was no way they could bring to him the sight of sun and rain and wild free places. So a beaten creature he became, until it was decided to send him to the Institution for the Blind. An incoherent letter came to me and I hurried to the hospital.

"Can't you do something, Jim? I'd rather be dead than in a jail for the blind. I don't want to be caged up any more."

Between us it was decided to write to General Harrison Gray Otis, owner of the Los Angeles *Times*. Our request would be small. Surely the great editor would use his influence to help Blink. All he wanted was the use of a street corner downtown, where he could sell newspapers.

I worked late into the night on a letter which I felt certain would touch the old general's heart. The next morning I had it typed, signed it Frank Thomas, the name Blink went by, and sent it by special delivery.

Weeks passed but no answer came. We sent another and even more urgent letter, but it too remained unanswered. Another, registered, followed. It was also ignored.

Then I decided to gain an audience with General Otis by hook or crook and then switch the conversation to Blink's plight. But that was no easy matter. Always fighting the world, and often in fear of his life, the general was no easy man to see.

After some days of consideration it dawned upon me that his wife had written many sentimental verses for his paper. I had also written sentimental verses, so it occurred to me to send samples of them to the general, telling him that Blink had written them, and praising at the same time the verses of his wife. Accordingly, I sent them with an ambitious letter begging an interview with the great man, telling him of my youth and the hard years, and also mentioning Ohio, for I had learned from "Who's Who in America" that he was born in my native State.

I must have written the one masterpiece of my life, for in two days I was invited to call at his home, "The Bivouac." A flunky

looked at my letter to assure himself, perhaps, that I was not another labor agitator bent on murder. After some deliberation he seated me in an alcove in the hallway.

A weak-looking man sat near me. He also waited for the general, who could be heard in his library talking to two women who were begging money for the Y. W. C. A. The talk drifted to the last Sunday edition of the *Times*, and I heard the general ask one of the ladies if she had read his article on Henry E. Huntington, a local gentleman of wealth. The lady untactfully admitted that she had not read it. There was a pause. The lady made matters worse by trying to explain why she had not read the Sunday paper—and this was Wednesday. The general excused himself and went upstairs. I saw him pass, scowling.

A few moments later he sent down a hundred dollars by his secretary. I could hear one of the ladies say: "Dear, dear! The general gave two hundred the last time." The secretary explained that he felt that the one hundred was all he could now afford. The ladies then took their departure. The fact that one of them had failed to read the *Times* that fatal Sunday had cost the Y. W. C. A. one hundred dollars.

III

The secretary now invited me into the library to wait for the general. I looked about and saw many volumes of sentimental verse by such poets as Alice and Phoebe Cary, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, Felicia Hemans, Ella Wheeler Wilcox, Mary Howitt and others of even lesser fame. Presently the general entered, followed by the weak-looking man who had waited with me in the hall. The general turned upon him and said brusquely:

"Well, what do you want?"

The little lamb of a man faced the tiger and said:

"Well, general, we are organizing an indemnity fund to protect such patriotic institutions as the *Times* against the ravages of labor agitators and socialists."

The general scowled, and said, as he paced the room restlessly:

"To hell with that damned graft! They didn't give a damn for me when my building was blown to pieces and twenty-one of my men were killed. I fought a battle, I did, for liberty and the Constitution! Without me, labor would crucify all enterprise in this State."

The lamb bleated: "But, general, Earl Rogers thinks well of our plan!" (Earl Rogers was the brilliant lawyer who had helped Clarence Darrow defend the McNamara brothers, dynamiters of the *Times* Building in 1911.)

It was a fatal bleat. The general threw his hands in the air and roared:

"He's a God damned —— ——!"

Then, pacing up and down the floor, he delivered a long harangue on the crimes of working men. The small man would rise to go, and the general would always shout: "Sit down! Sit down!" When the gentleman managed to leave at last the general turned to me and said:

"My God! Those fellows are hard to get rid of!"

I immediately committed a great social blunder. I called him *Mister* Otis. He turned upon me quickly:

"*General*, if you please! Not that I'm vain—but young men should be taught discipline."

My hand clenched. But I thought of Blink, and was humble once again, and generaled the general all over the room. I mentioned my verses, but he preferred to rave against union labor. He stood before me, an immense man, with stooping shoulders, and heavy pouches under his eyes. His frame, once a great deal over six feet, had shriveled. He was a withered giant with a bag of skin on his bones. His eyes were close together, and all the face wrinkles converged to the corners of them. There was fanatical zeal and finality in his every utterance. Unluckily for me, the departing sheep who wanted to help the tiger fight labor—for a price—had only succeeded in putting him in an evil mood. He

raved on and on. Parrying for an opening, I shot in:

"I was reading the other day, General, some verses by your distinguished wife, General, and knowing how you must have helped her, General, I have made bold to write and ask you, General, if I might not presume upon your patience, General, not for myself, General, but for a blind boy friend of mine, General, who also writes verse, General."

"Huh!" he grunted. "But would you know a piece of news if you saw it coming down the street?"

The Irish in me was still unsubdued by so mighty a presence. I replied:

"I think so, General . . . but I'm not asking for myself, General. You see, General, I have a young friend who's blind, General. He writes verses, General, and he used to work on your paper helping printers, General. One eye was fairly good when he started there, General. We ain't blamin' anybody, General. He might have lost it, anyhow, General. Though Blink claims all the towels was full of ink around the place, General."

That was unfortunate—but I was busy generaling him, and untrained in diplomacy.

"Damn it to hell, what was wrong with the towels? Everything's one damned complaint after another, by God! What in hell do you want?"

"Well, you see, General," I shot in quickly, "Blink's blind as a bat, General, and he only wants a street corner, General."

"Only wants! Oh, hell! Only wants—They all want something!"

"But this won't cost a dime, General. The judge told Blink if he didn't work he'd send him to jail, General, and Blink wants a corner downtown where he can peddle papers, General. Why, he'll sell two *Timeses* to one *Examiner*, General. He's a white boy, General, and I've never known him to double-cross anybody."

"How long did he work for me?"

"Not long, General. His eye went gooey quick. Then it was curtains for Blink, General."

The general walked rapidly up and down the floor, withered red hands behind his back, shaggy head bent low, and long wrinkles stretching across his forehead.

"I can't do anything. There's places for blind men in this State. That's why we have government and pay taxes."

"But you see," I answered, stepping before him, no longer the humble, reformed road-kid, "you see, Blink's worse than blind. He has a head on him. I've seen him go nuts over a sunset. . . ." Seeing a scowl, my method changed for Blink's sake. "And he used to like your wife's poems, General, and he read the *Times* and believed in all you said, General. That's why he went to work for you, General. He could have started for some other paper, but he preferred to work for the *Times*, General!"

Ignoring my scramble of words he blurted out:

"We have a State Liability Act—let that take care of him. Too many blind men peddling papers on the streets now."

"But something muffed with the State Act, General. They want to railroad him to the Blind Asylum, General. And he'll croak himself before he goes, I'm sure, General. By God! *I* would! I wouldn't eat their damned bread, General, if it was smeared with honey—and Blink's been in other asylums for the poor. And so have I, General—you know what they're like."

The defiant old man, long used to the centre of the stage, was ruffled by my effrontery.

"No, and I don't give a God damn," he answered.

"But, General, you have a great soul—you just gave the Y. W. C. A. some money—Blink doesn't ask for a thin dime."

"It makes no difference. The State should take care of him. He'd be in the world's way outside. . . . There he'd be treated well."

"Maybe you're right, General—but I can't sell Blink the idea. I'd be a hypocrite if I tried."

"Well, that's enough. There's nothing I can do."

"Thank you, General," I said, and left the room.

I strolled into Westlake Park unmindful of decorated nature everywhere. I would have to lie to Blink—would have to tell him that the General would take his case under advisement. I'd have to say: "You know, kid, whenever those big guys do that something always happens. You'll have to be patient, though, Blink—those guys have a lot on their minds—and you may even have to take a ride to the blind joint for a while, and then some of us can sign a bond and get you out. General Otis sure'll help us. He ain't nearly the mean guy everybody makes him out. Jack London and Clarence Darrow and that gang only have their side of it, Blink. You gotta remember that Otis has his side, too. Look what a lot of them guys did to his building . . ." and, so thinking, I arrived at the County Hospital.

Blink, as usual, was stretched out on his bed. His spirits were so low that he seldom had ambition enough to grope his way about the ward. To cheer him, his underworld visitors would disguise their voices and make him guess who had come to see him.

I said no word that day as I stood near his bed. He touched the muscles of my forearm—his way of recognizing me—and said with a touch of gaiety in his voice:

"That you, Jim? God! I'm glad."

"Yep, it's me, Blink, and I sure got some good news for you. Of course, it won't happen right away—but old General Debility Otis said he'd do what he could. It'll take time, though, Blink, as you know those guys are busy . . . so you'll have to be patient."

"Oh, I'll be patient, Jim. God, I'll be patient! I can't do nothin' else."

He lay back on the bed, the black tangled hair sinking into the pillow. His hand clutched mine in a feverish grasp as I looked down in his handsome face and saw, as usual, the tears gush from the holes in his head. Overcome, I leaned on his breast and sobbed, "The God damned old —— ——! . . . Blink, I wish to Christ I could give you eyes. . . . You could have one of mine if I could fix it so's you could!"

The hands patted my shoulders, "That's all right, Jim . . . maybe something'll happen."

"Sure thing, Blink, nobody knows. Maybe in a year some guy'll invent eyes you can see out of—they do funnier things than that."

Hope came into Blink's voice.

"I've been thinkin' about that, Jim. You know, maybe they can do that."

"Sure," I answered, "and I'll bet they'll be doin' it, too. I'll bet you they'll be takin' dead men's eyes, and fixing them in and tying up the nerves . . . so's it'll be like it was before people go blind. I was reading something about that the other day," I lied.

IV

Three months had passed since the interview with Otis. Christmas came. The time was drawing near for Blink's journey to the Hospital for the Blind. All his poverty-stricken friends insisted that he go to the institution until more suitable arrangements could be made.

During Christmas week we took up a collection of nearly seventy dollars. We took the money to him with much forced banter and the words, "We're loaning you this, Blink, till you get a good corner downtown."

Always eager for news, he inquired what word had come from General Otis. I told him that I had heard from the general's secretary the day before, and that the general was taking the matter up with the City Council. This false news appeased him somewhat, and we talked of old times until it was time for me to go.

The hospital, situated as it was on a busy thoroughfare, was no easy place for a blind man to escape from. Yet Blink did escape—after the lights had been put out, the night before he was to be sent to the asylum. The city of Los Angeles was four miles away, and the path taken there by a

blind man must have been a devious one.

But Blink found his way to a cheap hotel, where the landlady gave him a room with another blind man. In the center of this room was an oil-cloth covered table. She asked Blink to be as tidy as possible and place everything on it. She let her little boy lead him about the next afternoon.

He asked the lad to go to a motion picture theatre with him—"where there was music." It was a continuous show and they remained for hours. The youngster became restless, so Blink paid him a dollar to remain another hour. Then he asked to be led to a pawnshop.

When I found that Blink had escaped I inquired in his old haunts. No one knew where he had gone. I spent the afternoon looking for him, without success, but felt reassured because of the money he had.

That evening a package came by special messenger. It was wrapped about with many rubber bands. They ran in every direction. The address was written with lead pencil and was hardly legible.

Inside the package of brown paper was fifty-one dollars in paper, gold and silver, of different denominations. The bills were crunched, the silver and gold loose among the paper. The letter said:

"I thought I'd send this back to you guys so the dicks won't get it when they search the room. I won't need it any more."

It was badly scrawled and some of the lines overlapped.

I hurried to the address the messenger gave me. Blink, gentleman to the end, had placed his head on the oil-cloth covered table before he drilled a hole through it with the revolver the pawnbroker had sold him.

The next morning the *Times* carried a little story to the effect that Frank Thomas, a printer, had committed suicide in a cheap hotel.

There was no funeral for Blink and no headstone. I did not believe in such things. A young Irish burglar wanted to pray for him every night. I told him to go ahead. He was later sentenced for life as an habitual criminal. I hope it has not interfered with his praying for Blink's soul. For I believe he had one.

BALLADS OF KIT CARSON

BY STANLEY VESTAL

'Rapaho Gal

It was on old Green River,
The trappers' rendezvous—
Bully Shunar just for fun
Thrashed a man or two.

"All Americans are cowards—
Leave 'em in the ditch;
Any skunk that interferes
I'll cut a stick and switch!"

Kit Carson's ears heard Bully's talk;
Kit's cold blue eye could see
The threat was meant for himself alone
On account of his bride-to-be.

Her spotted pony through the ford
Waded splash and splash;
The sleigh bells on her bridle rein
At every pace went chink and clash;

Her glossy hair shone rifle-bright,
Her face was painted fair to see;
The fringes over her silver belt
Hung down below her knee.

'Rapaho Gal sat in the lodge:
"Where are you going, my lover Kit?"
"I'm going to pistol a rattlesnake—
One of my friends is bit."

"Beware of his fangs, my lover Kit—
He's treacherous and low—
The orn'riest snake of a mountain man
Ever worked a woman woe!"

"'Rapaho Gal, for you I fight—
He craves you for his bed;
There will never be peace on old Green River
'Til him or me is dead."

Kit jumped onto his buffalo horse,
The swiftest in his band;
He went looking for Bully Shunar
With his pistol in his hand.

Bully Shunar was no coward—
He raced across the land
With his rifle laid along his thigh
Ready to shoot offhand.

"Where are you ridin' so fast, Bully?
Maybe you're lookin' for me?"
The dirty liar answered, "No!"
And fired along his knee.

Though Kit was quick, the bullet grazed,
The powder burned his cheek:
But Bully Shunar tumbled down
And never more will speak.

"My lover Kit, my heart is good
To see you safe and sound;
Come into the lodge, my lover dear,
And I will dress your wound."

"'Rapaho Gal, no more you'll go
In terror of your life;
The rattlesnake is cold and dead,
And you're Kit Carson's wife!"

Little Chief

"Thar's Injun sign along the trail,
And Stone Calf's band is out;
Come day, them Cheyennes will be hyar—
Of that I make no doubt.